

Sex industry's growth jumps in Seattle area, study finds

A just-released study of the sex industry in eight U.S. metropolitan areas shows Seattle has the most diverse marketplace for prostitution — from street and online prostitution to massage parlors, home-based brothels and escort services — and the highest rate of growth.

By [Christine Clarridge](#)

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A comprehensive new study into the sex trade in eight U.S. metropolitan areas found Seattle-Tacoma offers the nation's most diverse marketplace for prostitution, from street and online prostitution to massage parlors, home-based brothels and escort services.

But even more surprising was the region's ready market for prostitution, according to the findings of the policy-research group Urban Institute. The underground commercial sex industry in Seattle-Tacoma showed the highest rate of growth of the areas examined, expanding from \$50 million a year in 2003 to an estimated \$112 million in 2007.

"It will be interesting to see why Seattle increased that much," said lead researcher Meredith Dank.

Capt. Eric Sano, of the Seattle Police Department's Coordinated Criminal Investigation section which oversees the vice unit, is not surprised by the numbers. But, he says, there's good reason for them: better reporting of prostitution-related crimes by Seattle-area law enforcement over the past decade.

Then there's the location.

"It's an international port city next to the Canadian border," he said. "It's a destination city on Interstate 5 and Interstate 90."

Released Wednesday, the [340-page study](#) by the Urban Institute and funded by the Justice Department, examines the underground commercial sex economy in Atlanta; Dallas; Washington, D.C.; Denver; Kansas City, Mo.; San Diego; Miami; and Seattle-Tacoma.

The study is the result of more than 250 interviews with pimps, sex traffickers, prostitutes and child pornographers, law-enforcement officials and attorneys. Those interviews produced a wealth of data on pricing, market structures and the sex workers' motivations.

Researchers acknowledged in their findings that reliable data and statistics were hard to find for the underground industry. In fact, the purpose of the study was to rectify the lack of raw data available to policymakers, researchers said in their introduction.

The study's economic conclusions relied on information gathered in 2003 and 2007, according to Dank of the Urban Institute.

Other information, including how pimps run their operations or why some prostitutes chose to remain in the field, was based on interviews conducted between 2011 and 2013. Nearly 142 people convicted of prostitution or trafficking in prostitution were interviewed, according to the report.

The study did not attempt to differentiate between people who were coerced into the sex industry and those who were involved voluntarily.

Instead, it attempts to document the underground business of sex trafficking; estimate the size of the commercial sex economy in the eight cities studied; and determine how sex traffickers operate.

Of the cities examined, the study found that Atlanta had the largest sex economy, bringing in \$290 million annually in 2007, with Miami not far behind at \$235 million. Denver had the least lucrative sex industry with an estimated \$40 million annual take, according to the report.

The Seattle-Tacoma sex industry's growth is notable, Dank said, because it more than doubled in four years.

According to officials with the Seattle Police Department and the King County Sheriff's Office, those numbers are likely misleading.

Sano, the Seattle police captain, believes the number of prostitution-related crimes jumped due to changes implemented years ago in how police record and identify such crimes.

"We are way ahead of the curve on this and have been named number one in the nation for our techniques, methods and how we code, track, report and investigate," Sano said. "We started reporting this data to the FBI's Uniform Crime Report before other people."

"I think our actual crime is probably commensurate with other cities but we're so cognizant about reporting that our numbers are going to be higher," Sano said.

In 2003, Washington legislators became the first in the nation to pass a state law criminalizing human trafficking.

The state, in recent years, has also gotten tougher on those who coerce or force underage girls into prostitution, as well as their customers.

The criminal charge of commercial sexual abuse of a minor became state law in 2007 and carried a harsher penalty than the previous charge used in such cases: first-degree promoting prostitution. The new charge carries a sentence of up to four years in prison.

And in June 2010, promoting the commercial sexual abuse of a minor became a Class A felony — a charge that is equivalent to first-degree rape or first-degree assault. The charge is now punishable by a prison sentence of seven to 10 years, up from roughly two years.

The study noted that Seattle-Tacoma has an array of highly organized massage parlors run by female foreign nationals with employees from South Korea, Vietnam and China who send much of their proceeds home. Similar operations were found in other cities.

However, Seattle is unique in having residential brothels where women, typically Asian women in their 40s and 50s, live and conduct business, according to the study. The arrangement offers more discretion for clients, Dank said.

“We didn’t find that type of Asian residential brothel anywhere else,” she said.

One such operation was [uncovered in February 2013](#) on the Eastside. According to federal prosecutors, Unruean Aboulafia, a Thai national, recruited women from her native Thailand to come to the U.S. illegally, paying their smuggling debts and setting them up in nondescript apartments in Bellevue and Kirkland.

They were required to pay her back, sometimes up to \$60,000, by working as prostitutes, according to charges contained in a federal indictment.

Not surprisingly, researchers determined that the Internet has changed the sex trade, altering the way sex is bought and sold and providing new markets for both recruitment and advertising.

Researchers also concluded that many pimps and prostitutes became involved in the sex trade due to social factors such as having family members in the business, being in poverty or having little interest or access to education.

Many pimps told researchers in interviews that they had previously dealt drugs, but saw prostitution as a less risky alternative in terms of criminal prosecution.

The study also confirmed that it is common for pimps to have prostitutes travel to work in a variety of cities, usually called a circuit.

Seattle-area pimps, for example, may have women working the Portland-to-Everett circuit or can go east and have them employed in Boise, Idaho and Las Vegas, Sano said.

Conversely, researchers said they also made some discoveries they called surprising.

Lead researcher Dank said interviews with pimps showed the commercial sex trade is typically run as a business, involving thought, planning, a business model and negotiations. Pimps seek to

create advantageous business relationships with hotel and motel owners, cellphone providers and rental-car agencies, she said.

In addition, Dank said the media has often portrayed drug use as encouraged or forced, while interviews with pimps revealed the opposite.

“At least a quarter didn’t condone drug use at all,” Dash said, as it leads some prostitutes to hold back money and “ruins the product.”

Information from Seattle Times archives is included in this report.

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